

Malawi: Orphan Children's Project

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Habitat for Humanity International Global Village recruits and sends volunteers to work on various construction Habitat for Humanity construction projects around the world. The village of Khobili in the Mulanje District of Malawi, Africa was selected as the location to construct three homes for villagers that had lost their homes during severe flooding. For me this was an incredible opportunity to come together with a team of other volunteers to build homes for orphans and their caretaker in a rural Malawian village. The Habitat team worked with skilled local masons to build safe, durable and comfortable houses from the foundation up. This was an extraordinary building opportunity to put my three years of Cal Poly Construction Management education to work. In addition, the families and their neighbors welcomed us into the community, and we became immersed in the daily life of their village. We were invited to see homes which were still standing, and toured the entire village of 1,000+ residents. After the Habitat volunteer team finished building the houses, local Habitat for Humanity staff provided the children with health education, legal assistance, along with community and educational support.

Introduction

I have always had a passion for helping others in need, and directly working with my hands. My love for both construction and humanitarian assistance lead me on this amazing journey to Mulanje, Malawi through Habitat for Humanity International Global Village. For me the ultimate goal of this trip was to bring dignity, hope and comfort into the lives of orphaned and vulnerable children, while using my construction management skills to make a significantly positive impact within their community.

As part of the Habitat team I traveled to the rural village of Khobili, in the Mulanje District of Malawi, where I was scheduled to work on the construction of two homes for families who have taken in children orphaned by the AIDS crisis. Unfortunately, AIDS has ravaged this impoverished African nation. Habitat for Humanity International plans to eventually improve the living conditions for 450 orphans and vulnerable Malawian children by December 2017.

Since this particular Habitat for Humanity program in Malawi began in 2009, with the assistance of dedicated volunteers from the United States and around the world, over 300 houses have already been constructed for groups of orphaned and vulnerable children, and their caretakers. Providing adequate housing contributes to a family's financial independence, provides stability, and improves the ability of the orphaned children to study and learn, thereby improving their education and their future. Construction of a clean, safe and durable shelter also contributes to the overall health and well-being of each child, family and/or caretaker.

Working with local skilled masons, the 16 member team of Habitat volunteers of which I was a part was scheduled to build two safe and comfortable homes from the foundation up to the roofs for three groups of orphaned children and their caretakers.

The local people speak Chichewa and some English, so language was at times a challenging barrier to communications on this construction project. I did learn a few words in Chichewa during this journey.

Building Process and Materials

Typical work included the mixing of matope (mud in Chichewa) and cement with water, transporting construction materials such as the bricks and scaffolding to the jobsite, carrying water and other tasks as assigned by the construction workers. When we arrived on site the first day we were given an orientation by Babi, who held both positions of site superintendent and project manager. He expertly demonstrated how to "butter the bricks" with matope and which rows were going to be header rows for structural purposes. The only safety orientation tips we

received was to drink enough water and be careful of bugs hiding in the bricks. We were then divided into two groups to complete the two houses scheduled to be built that week.

The foundation had already been dug and built up to where one brick was visible above ground. Strips of black garbage bags were used as the moisture barrier between the foundation bricks, and the bricks we used for construction of the walls. String was stretched from one end of the walls being built to the other as a makeshift leveling mechanism. Working all day, we enjoyed breaks at 10:00 a.m., 12:00 p.m. and 3:00 p.m. when we ate snacks, hydrated, reapplied sunscreen and bug repellent and best of all played with the local children. By the end of the first day we were already ahead of schedule on the homes.



Strings ensured the installed bricks were level.



Break time was spent playing with the children.

By the third day we had to reinstall the scaffolding because we had built the walls up so high. One of the scaffolds was a more standard one constructed from metal. The other scaffold was 'homemade' and made from branches cut from the local trees. Both scaffolds had huge gaps and many missing planks on the deck where we walked. We had no tie offs, but were required to wear hard hats whenever we were working on the scaffold. The ground crew who were delivering bricks and matope to the workers on the scaffolds was not required to wear hardhats, which I found to be backwards thinking from a safety standpoint.



This makeshift wooden scaffold was surprisingly sturdy!



Here I am working on the metal scaffold preparing for window installation.

As we remained ahead of schedule throughout the construction of the two homes, we were able to break off into a third group and begin work on a new home for Chief Agnes. She too had lost her home during the heavy rainy season and was currently staying with her daughter, who had a stroke 6 months back and lost the ability to speak. Agnes also had taken in her three grandchildren from another daughter who had passed away. In total there was a

family of seven people living in a house which was less than 400 square feet. Although the homes we built were still small, Agnes and her three grandchildren will be able to live separately in their own home, and have more space.

On the last day of construction we were greeted by the Khobili villagers singing and dancing in the rain. After a morning ceremony, the volunteers and I put the finishing touches on the homes such as stripping off the form work for the concrete placed above the windows as a header, and installing the corrugated metal roof. We finished the two scheduled homes around lunchtime, at which point the village held a wonderful 'thank you' ceremony. They were grateful to have the home because not only were they going to be adequately sheltered from the rain, but they could take in other villagers during times of need. The generosity and gracious spirit of the people of Khobili is immense.



Chief Agnes and her 3 orphan grandchildren thanking us for the home we Habitat volunteers began constructing for them to live.



Elida Mtuwa and her family of 5 orphaned children ages 2 to 11, for whom we built the second home.

Discovery

In Malawi 78% of the country's population live in houses made from dirt and mud. During the rainy season the houses regularly cave in or collapse, rendering the residents homeless. The Malawian villages tend to be very close-knit, multigenerational communities of incredibly kind and generous people. The villagers are always willing to take in the homeless families, but as the average house is just 400 square feet or less, this leaves no room to sleep or even live properly.

Because of the swift and efficient work of the dedicated Habitat for Humanity volunteers, by the end of the trip we were proud to have completed two and a half houses, exceeding the initially planned two homes we had been scheduled to construct in Khobili. The third house we began for Chief Agnes and her grandchildren was scheduled to be completed after we Habitat volunteers departed for our North American homes.

The cost of each Malawian brick house including labor was approximately \$4,600USD. Each home we built was roughly 300 - 400 square feet, and would be housing between 3 to 5 people. The local professional construction workers were not even wearing shoes on the jobsite, and the only tools we volunteers had to build these homes were a level and spackling trowels. From an economic standpoint it really does not take much money to dramatically improve the lives of those less fortunate than ourselves. With the construction of these three homes, whenever there is a heavy rainstorm, or someone in the village needs a place to stay, these families will have the means to take them in and provide a warm, dry place shelter, even with such a small footprint. The people of Khobili were so extraordinarily kind and generous. I will never forget them and am forever changed by this amazing experience. With the limited resources available they are able to share whatever is available within the community for the benefit of everyone.

Deliverables

This Malawian residential construction project was an excellent one to complete due to the hands-on nature of the Habitat for Humanity International program. Habitat encourages all their volunteers to participate fully and ensures that each volunteer has the opportunity to try out all the various scopes of work needed for the completion of the project. I was able to fully participate in the following work activities on the construction jobsites:

- Mud mixing (matope, cement and water ration)
- Erecting scaffolding
- Hodcarrying (transporting bricks)
- Bricklaying and bricklaying styles (Common Bond)
- Learning about the structural elements of the walls (headers and corners)
- Installing door and window frames
- Installing roof rafters and the corrugated metal roof
- Creating the formwork for concrete window headers
- Mixing concrete
- Leveling and squaring walls
- Plastering interior walls

Lessons Learned

There were a number of lessons to be learned on my journey to Malawi. I learned resourcefulness and that there is more than one way to do things on a construction jobsite. The formwork for the window headers was made from wood, and our cardboard pizza boxes which we volunteers had from lunch. While constructing homes in Khobili there may not have been any building codes, regulations and safety standards but I learned what worked best with the limited resources available.

The lessons I learned on this Habitat for Humanity construction trip were a lot more than what goes into building a brick house in Malawi. I learned how to work through very challenging language barriers, and I learned how to work cooperatively on a project team for one common positive goal. But most of all I learned that the people in the village of Khobili had so much more to give us than we ever had to give to them.



The finished brick home with corrugated steel roof.



Here I am teaching the local children to dance the Macarena!

Applied Knowledge

What I experienced and learned on this trip was unmatched by any previous learning opportunity that I have had in all my years in school. Even with my construction management summer internships, extensive years of volunteer service in the United States, and in my volunteer experiences to Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Haiti, this was the most

involved and the hardest I have ever worked on a construction project. There may have been no official plans or specs for the construction of these homes, but I found that as a team we volunteers stayed ahead of schedule the entire time during the construction. One aspect I noticed was how refreshing to not have a week's wait to receive a response back on an RFI whenever a question arose! This was also an extremely good way for me to see firsthand what it was like to work with an owner, the contractor, and subcontractors. As part of the closely knit, cooperative team we worked together well, and were not in competition against one another. The conditions may have been different for construction projects here in the U.S., but in the end the residential construction project was still a family's home. My leadership skills were greatly enhanced and expanded throughout this journey, as well as my general knowledge of various construction practices. Here in the United States it is rare that brick buildings are constructed with solid bricks, but rather built with wooden or steel frames and brick veneers. In the future, although I may never be able to use these particular construction skills outside of rural Malawi, the knowledge I gained during this trip will never be forgotten.

Reflections

For me personally the most amazing aspect of this trip to Malawi was that although the villagers had so little they were so incredibly generous. During the time that I was in Khobili, there was only enough time to build new homes for three of the families, including the partial construction of a new home for Agnes, the Chief of the village. Everyone was so happy for the families receiving the new homes, even though they may not have had adequate housing themselves. Villagers pitched in to help by carrying brick, water and matope (mud).

We Habitat for Humanity volunteers also had the opportunity to visit the local school. That was one of the most touching experiences I have had in my life. Some of the children did not even have chairs to sit during the class. The first page of their mathematics book informed them that they could not get HIV/AIDS from sharing their books. I feel so very fortunate to have always attended schools where everything I needed was always provided in abundance, and much more, in order to have made possible the accomplishment of all my dreams and goals. There is so much more which can be done to really help children like the ones in the village of Khobili, Malawi on a long term, permanent basis.

On the last day of this journey the villagers conducted a big celebration in our honor as thanks for the construction of the homes, and we volunteers had lunch with all the families in the village. In addition to the cost of the trip and travel expenses, we Habitat volunteers had raised enough money as a group to feed the entire village of 1,000 individuals! The villagers took huge portions and then shared them amongst each other, eating with their hands. It quickly became apparent that this was probably the most food they had ever eaten at one time in their lives, and may never have that again. Providing humanitarian aid to villages such as Khobili, Malawi is not that difficult and does not require a huge expenditure of funds. All that is necessary to dramatically improve the lives for so many people is our serious and sustained commitment to help the least vulnerable and least fortunate.